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THE MEZUZAH MADE IT TO AUSHWITZ , 1944

By Sol Wieder

A "Mezuzah" is a tiny scroll of parchment, inscribed with scriptural readings and housed in a small case. The Scriptural verses in the Mezuzah speak of the Jew's obligation to God and to obey HIS commandments. The case is attached to the right (as we enter) doorpost of Jewish Houses of Worship, business places and in each room of a house used for living purposes. Traditional Jews will always touch their fingers to a Mezuzah. Many will kiss their fingers after touching the Mezuzah as they come in and go out of the house as a reminder to practice all God's laws.

My parents owned a beautiful large house on the main "square" of town. We enjoyed the better things in life. Every room had a Mezuzah, some fancy and some not so fancy.... The main entrance door had a beautiful small hand carved "ivory" Mezuzah case with the name "Shaddai" (Almighty) engraved.

About 120 Jewish families occupied more than 100 homes in Dolha, a small town in the Carpathian Mountains of former Czechoslovakia (annexed by Hungary in 1939). The Jewish community also had a large synagogue and a smaller place of worship in the house owned by the Chief Rabbi, plus several Hebrew schools and a Mikvah. It is estimated that our community had more than 600-700 Mezuzahs' - 'large and small - fancy and plain. The Mezuzah' were revered and touched with affection by young and old, men and women alike.

On Thursday, April 26, 1944, we heard the sound of the Town Crier's drum and the announcement was made that all Jews - young and old - must be ready for relocation on Sunday, April the 29th 1944. Circulars with complete instructions were handed out to each Jewish household. To avoid confusion, we were instructed to pack and to take a small amount of essential items with us, like bedding, soap, clothing and food - properly and clearly recording our name(s) on each bundle, valise or package. Valuables like money, watches, jewelry and so on were to be carried in person. For a religious Jew this was not sufficient. My father, a modern orthodox Jew, also packed other essentials and important items, like the Tallith (prayer shawl) Tefillin (phylacteries) and several prayer books. A religious Jew must be prepared at all times, he used to say. There is no better ammunition than prayer, love and devotion to God..

I was sure that my father completely forgot the Mezuzahs' in our house, nailed or pasted down on each outside doorpost. If he were to remove them, what would he do with them?

"What if".... was very popular in our town the last few weeks before deportation. What if the enemies of the Jews change their mind and decide to let us stay? What if they take us away and bring us back in a few days, weeks or months?

The resettlement "rumor mill" flourished and kept growing like a cancer. No one knew or heard about Auschwitz. Most likely they will take us to Kolomey or Kamenetz Podolsk was a theory expressed by some.... After the liberation, we learned that Kamenetz Podolsk and Kolomey were not a resettlement camp but a Killing Field where the German "SS" Einsatzgruppen machine gunned entire Jewish communities shortly upon arrival. Mass graves were waiting for the victims to be swallowed up like a volcano.

The final hour of the "phony" relocation or resettlement has arrived. It was now Sunday, April the 29th 1944 and the Hungarian Police came to our house with Michael, a peasant with his empty wagon pulled by two horses. The peasant population made their horses and wagons available to assist the Jews in bringing the clearly identified belongings to the local railroad station.

"You people" seem to move very slowly, said the policeman.
The train may leave without you.
What a joke?....

My mother held on to my two younger brothers, assisted by my tall sister Ruchel. My father and I kept bringing luggage, bundles and packages and placed them in the empty wagon. Mother was crying and hated to leave the house which gave her so much pleasure and happiness for so many years. My father said little, but tried in his own way to calm my mother.

Me? I was quiet and speechless.. I had a lot to say to the policemen and the volunteer peasant with drawn horse and wagon. My father warned me to pay attention and behave, otherwise the policemen may beat me to death. Hungarian police had a reputation of beating people without mercy, not only Jewish people. Not long ago, my uncle Shmiel Dovid Gelb from Chust, a city not far from our hometown was beaten to death by the Hungarian police for his refusal to shave his beard... I can truly understand my fathers concern for my well being.... The policemen were getting impatient with the pace of our loading. We just did not have the heart to leave our home full of fine china, silver wine cups, candlelabras, furniture, tapestries, special Passover dishes and other valuables and lots of good memories... Who will look after our belongings and the house?...

Are you ready, asked one of the policemen... If so, lock up the front door and hand us all the keys to the house. The sooner you leave, the better - so we can seal it, to avoid break ins.

Just one second, officer.... I want to double check the door to make sure it was locked properly.

Go ahead and make it fast - we don't have all day....

I reached the front door, pretending to double check the lock, instead I ripped off the "Mezuzah" and quietly put it in my pocket.

I handed the policeman the keys...

Any more?

No Sir... you have them all..

Good, lets move to the railroad station, he tells the peasant.

The peasant, whom we have known for many years, asked my mother and my siblings whether they would like to climb into the wagon and sit on the

bundles or packages.. My father says "yes" for my mother and thanked him for being so nice, so considerate, so neighborly. My father and I walked by foot. We were both deep in our thoughts and kept our thinking to ourselves. I wondered what was going thru my fathers mind....

The luggage, packages and valises, properly identified, were removed from the wagon and placed in a special designated section near the railroad ticket office. I looked up at the sky to predict the weather. Thank God, I said, the weather looks good for resettlement or whatever... At the "railroad station" we met many Jewish families from our community. Several bottles of whiskey appeared on the scene.... Some people helped themselves to a drink or two, some did not and some were already drunk.....

Many empty open cars appeared on the railroad track - not ready to leave yet. Normally, open railroad cars were used to transport coal or lumber. Today, I guess, the Jews aren't worth more than coal or lumber.

People mingled, some cried and many prayed.... Several Hungarian policemen with bayonets drawn arrived with prepared lists of Jews, in alphabetical order. As your name is called, you are to enter the open wagon was the order of the day. Don't worry about your bundles, they are all here and will leave with you in separate compartments. The locomotive blew a loud whistle and the train started moving slowly but surely - packed with human cargo, destination unknown... Thirty minutes later, the train made a stop at a nearby village, picking up additional cargo, consisting of twenty Jewish families and again we were on our way...

Where to? Only God knows....
We finally arrived.

The station sign tells us that we are in Beregszasz, a medium size beautiful city where several thousand Jewish people once lived, a city that I have seen several times before. Once, when I was eleven years old, I remember being hospitalized in Beregszasz, where my adenoids and tonsils were removed. My father, who loved me dearly, did not leave me and stayed with me at the hospital, until I was released, three days later.

We disembarked and were taken again with horse drawn wagons to a ghetto, known as "Beregszasz Tonia" where we were clustered together with many other Jews from different communities. Conditions were indescribable, sanitation was very poor and food was scarce. I still remember waiting in line for hours with a bucket in my hand near the one and only "water pump" in the ghetto. The ghetto was formally a brick factory....

On May 15, 1944, the entire ghetto was emptied with the help of armed Hungarian policemen and taken to the Beregszasz railroad station where we noticed German "SS" soldiers for the first time. We saw hundreds on empty cattle cars on the station. We were each handed a small loaf of bread. Each cattle car had a large pail of drinking water and a pail for bodily needs. The "SS" squeezed us tightly into the cattle cars, locking and sealing the cars from the outside. There was one small opening with barbed wire in each car. People took turns standing near the small opening of the upper part of the cattle car to grab some breathing air.

Believe it or not, some men even tried to organize prayer services. Women and children unable to stand experienced severe difficulties in breathing. Some died after the first day of the journey. After the three day journey under unbelievable and inhumane conditions, those who were still alive (some ill and older people died in transit) arrived at an unknown destination, which we later learned was "Auschwitz," better known as "Hell on Earth." The metal entrance gate to Auschwitz had a sign: "Arbeit Macht Frei." (Work will make you free)

The train stopped at the station and had not been moving for several hours. Obviously we had arrived. Why are they not opening the doors? Don't they realize that we are all exhausted, tired, starved and dying of thirst?....

We plead in many languages - please, please open the doors.

No one paid attention to our agony....

Thru the opening we noticed many sealed cattle cars standing still on the tracks. We yelled and screamed:

"Jews, where are we?

How long have you been waiting here?"

Since midnight, was the answer.

The train, next to ours suddenly was being emptied out. The people standing and staring thru the window, watched and reported to the rest of us what was taking place nearby. They saw people jumping out of the cattle cars, some were helped. In a very short time, the empty train moved away and a new train full of people took over the railroad tracks. Everyone felt that we must be next. We were all exhausted, we just wanted to get out....

Yes, we were next.... Men in German uniforms with "death head insignias" plus "SS" markings swung back all the doors. Loud shouts were coming from all directions: "JUDEN RAUS" (Jews Out) There was total confusion and chaos. The able bodied men, women and children jumped down. Others were helped by people with striped uniforms speaking Yiddish.... Uniformed "SS" guards with wild barking dogs were everywhere.

Move, move faster you lazy - dirty Jews. Many stumbled.

People are shoved, beaten with heavy wooden sticks and canes for stopping a minute to stretch their legs after the long journey. No one was given a chance to recover from the long journey or catch their breath. Bundles are snatched from our hands, coats are ripped off our backs, purses, canes and umbrellas are taken away.

Everyone was yelling, screaming and crying:

I can't find my Mirele?

Where is Surelle?..

There is total pandemonium....

In the commotion and confusion, people were losing each other and families were instantly separated and torn apart.

Husbands are trying to find their wives.

Mothers are crying and tearing their hair out, looking for their children.

The sticks and canes are flying everywhere - people are beaten without a stop. Many are bleeding profusely from the inflicted wounds.

The wild German shepherds are ready to tear us apart.....

An older man, speaking in perfect German brought some of his medals along. They were given to him for bravery by the German Army during the First World War. The old man was very anxious to show it to the young good looking SS guard

"Look-look" - what I have, he yelled with pride.

The "SS" guard looked and without a second thought, hit the old man's face very hard with the cane in his hand. The old man fell to the ground, babbling incoherently, bleeding from his mouth and nose and still holding on to the medals in his hand. For an added bonus, the "SS" kicked the old man several times.

What happened to the old man with the medals? No one knows and no one cared..... He was not the only man laying on the ground bleeding or covered with spittle and foaming from their mouths, dying and gasping their last breath.....

We must have order was the loud message coming from somewhere. The German and Ukrainian "SS" guards accomplished separating the men and ordered the women and children along side us in parallel lines. Suddenly, I found myself alone with my father and uncle Lipe. I no longer could see my mother, my sister, my two brothers and the rest of my family. They were mixed with hundreds and hundreds of others. For a while I kept yelling at the top of my lungs, Mother, Ruchelle, Srully (short for Israel) and Mayer but to no avail.... For a second I was sure I heard a woman yell, Shlomo.... Shlomo....

Who knows if it was my mother trying to tell me something... She loved me so much... I know... There were too many mothers calling names and there were many "Shlomos" in the crowd.....

I could not help myself and started sobbing, asking my father, where are they taking them.... My father stared in the direction of the women and children, his face showing signs of anguish and frustration. He was shocked, speechless and looked bewildered. I felt that he wanted to cry so badly... I could feel it in my being..... Lipe, my uncle could no longer see his wife and five small children - cried like a baby, looking to the skies and motioning his hands helplessly.

"God, what did I do to deserve this."

He kept on repeating the same question, again and again....

There was no answer.....

The "SS" hurried them along, separating able bodied women from the rest and telling the others to move on. The faster you move, the faster you will get food and water. Don't worry about your husbands and fathers.... You will see them soon, they were promised and reassured. My father and I saw them walking quietly and peacefully, mothers' holding on tightly to their children and children helping other children. Children assisting mothers, grandmothers and aunts... From that moment on, I never - ever saw my mother, sister, two brothers, many aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors and friends - dead or alive. In front of our eyes they just disappeared with the rest of the Jewish community, into thin air....

Our turn came next.... We were totally surrounded by a large contingent of "SS" officers and people in striped uniforms called 'KAPOS.' The Kapos were also very cruel. They too were carrying heavy sticks and canes that could open a person's head with one swing. I hated the "KAPOS" with a passion. We were told that "Selection" time was here. All men were ordered to remove their hats, jackets and shirts and form a single line for inspection. Leave the clothing on the ground, we were ordered. You'll get them back later.... One by one, half naked we march by Dr. Mengelle and several other "SS" doctors with sticks in their hands. Doctor Mengelle directed us to go to the left side or the right side....

Sick looking, old people, the very young and disabled on the left. The selection moved swiftly and efficiently without a peep from anyone. Here and there we witnessed a person being shot or beaten for moving out of line. In one instance a deaf person in the crowd had difficulties following directions and someone tried to be helpful, using hand signs. Both were brutally beaten and removed somewhere.

Without me realizing it, within a split second, a decision was made that "I shall live" by Dr. Mengelle who waved his right hand after glancing over my half naked body. My father and uncle Lipe were also "chosen to live" - at least for now...

Nothing "bad" is going to happen to you, we were told. Just listen and follow directions. Immediately, we were told that we were heading toward the showers, or to the "sauna" as they called it here. No one in my group resisted. You will wash yourself here and afterwards your civilian clothes will be exchanged for clean uniforms in which you will work.

How about our mothers, wives and siblings?
We promise you that you will see them afterwards.

We entered the "sauna," a huge room with white wall tiles. We were asked politely then ordered firmly to undress swiftly and surrender wedding rings, money, fountain pens, watches and any other valuables, while the "SS" guards with pistols in their belts, sticks or canes in their hands were milling around us. They were all over the place.... In a few minutes we were all stark naked.

What shall I do with the small "Mezuzah Parchment Scroll" that I removed from our doorstep and brought along with me? Shall I hide it in my mouth? Will I choke on it? I made a quick decision and placed it under my arm pit. I convinced myself that no one will notice it... My father, uncle Lipe and I — all naked, look at each other in total silence. We were all in shock without anyone getting any shock treatments. We kept moving further where we encountered men with stripped uniforms, some sitting and some standing whose task it was to cut our hair without exchanging a word.

One man cut the hair off my head, the second was suppose to cut under my armpits and pubic hair.

In Yiddish, the "hair cutter" asked me to raise my right arm.
In a very low voice, I replied in Yiddish. Ich hob a Mezuzah dort. (I have a Mezuzah there.)

Are you crazy? Do you want to get killed?...

I will look after it. Trust me... I swear....

I listened and lifted my arm and the tiny parchment scroll from the
Mezuzah dropped on the pile of hair below.

Quietly, the "hair cutter" picked it up and gave it a quick kiss. I felt
relieved that the Mezuzah scroll is now in good hands and will be
looked after - maybe even kissed.

